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AUTHOR Clement, John R. B.
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ABSTRACT

For over two-thirds of the public schools in the United States, it is now possible to see a report on school performance over the Internet. Such reports can include student demographics and performance, teacher qualifications and salary levels, funds expended per pupil, and sources of funding. Often, bases are offered for comparing a school with other schools with similar student populations or financial resources or from similar locations. This paper examines the following factors that have made this aggregation of readily available information possible: a national drive toward education reform; the widespread availability of computers and the Internet in school systems; and advances in methods for collecting, sharing, and displaying information. The paper also summarizes policy trends and changes in the ongoing national debate about schools that the availability of these reports will make possible. (Author/MES)

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Online School Performance Reports: Grading the Schools, Giving Citizens Data for Reform

John R.B. Clement, Education Statistics Services Institute, Washington, D.C., USA (jclement@dc.air.org)

Abstract: For over two-thirds of the public schools in the United States it is now possible to see a report on school performance over the Internet. Such reports can include student demographics and performance, teacher qualifications and salary levels, funds expended per pupil, and sources of funding. Often, bases are offered for comparing a school with other schools with similar student populations, or financial resources, or from similar locations.
We examine the factors that have made this aggregation of readily-available information possible: a national drive toward education reform; the widespread availability of computers and the Internet in school systems; and advances in methods for collecting, sharing and displaying information. The paper also summarizes policy trends and changes in the ongoing national debate about schools that the availability of these reports will make possible.

Over the past ten years, with little fanfare, a very special sort of information revolution has been coming about in public education in the United States. For over two-thirds of public schools in the country, it is now possible to examine over the Internet a report card stating how students are performing and how qualified are their teachers, often displaying the moneys spent to achieve this performance level. Frequently we can compare one school to another, or to one of various regional, demographic or state averages.

The confluence of several factors has made online school performance reports possible. The most notable of these is the drive toward education reform, which has renewed interest by parents, administrators, policy makers, and concerned citizens in how schools are doing. Given the motivation, technology has provided the means: widespread Internet access; and the development of World Wide Web technologies for displaying and sharing information in a platform-independent manner.

The availability of this information, and the debates that should result on school issues, imply significant changes for U.S. education. It will certainly change how we talk about schools and what we expect of them – it is already doing so. It may not be excessively optimistic to expect this kind of open disclosure to extend itself to other areas of government and public service: the questions that we can and do now ask, but didn't before, are novel and fundamental.

A preliminary estimate (based on school year 1996-1997 data[1]) is that building-level report cards are available online for just over 70 per cent of the nation's public schools in 28 states. More state education systems are producing these reports, and it is only a matter of time until they too are placed online. It is only a question of time before an online report card is available for every school in the nation.

Perhaps most interesting is the participation of private enterprise in this disclosure effort. For example, the New Jersey school report card site was developed and is maintained by the Philadelphia Inquirer, although the data are collected by the New Jersey Department of Education (see http://www.phillynews.com/packages/njschools/).

Describing a "typical" school performance report

Although they vary widely, there is a common kernel. Consider the 1998 school report for Kalkaska Middle School in Kalkaska, Michigan, in the Traverse Bay area. The report includes three years of student performance data, mean teacher salaries (but no information on teacher credentials), school accreditation information, and financial data – a snapshot (actually, a three-piece short film) of the school. It shows trends over time (in this case, general increases in 7th grade math and reading percent satisfactory, and increases in 8th grade science percent satisfactory but

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decreases in 8th grade writing percent satisfactory). For demographic context, the report provides the percentage of individuals who receive either free or reduced-price lunches through the school.

Other sites provide more information on teacher education levels and certification – for example, in New Jersey the percentage of teachers with a Master's degree or more. Other states also provide a variety of comparison possibilities, either to statewide averages or to schools with similar demographic characteristics. In a couple of states (California and Massachusetts), data are provided on the availability of technology in the schools. Performance reports are provided for school districts, and also for entire states.

Student data in school report cards shows a national shift, from nearly exclusive dependence on norm-referenced measures toward criterion-referenced measures adapted to, or derived from, state content or performance standards. This is part of a broader reform and accountability trend, and we discuss the trend and its implications later in this paper. For now we will simply mention that performance-based measures have a face validity that norm-referenced tests lack, but in return criterion-based measures lack direct comparability across state boundaries[2]. Also given are the basic demographic facts of the school's student population, including one or more estimates of poverty levels in the school (or its district's) coverage area. A final piece of information provided at upper secondary levels concerns dropout and completion/graduation rates.

Teacher data are most often given in terms of teacher educational background, experience and certification levels; less frequently information is presented on school accreditation.

Finally, we add school finances. The basic cost unit is the cost per student full-time equivalent (FTE), which is accounted for in a variety of ways. Revenues are often given in terms of the local tax base, or presented with state contributions as a fraction of the total.

Some systems integrate these numbers into school performance values. Composite scores are generated by state performance systems in Kentucky and North Carolina. These numbers have disadvantages from the viewpoint of citizen understanding and information, but they have one overwhelming advantage: they allow decisions to be made. While multiple numbers, some of which go up over time and some of which go down, are susceptible to argument, single numbers can be incontrovertible – they either are larger or smaller. The disadvantage to the average citizen is loss of face validity, leading to difficulties of interpretation. A composite score can be difficult or impossible to interpret if it is based on weighted numbers from completely different areas, such as student performance and finances. Systems such as those in North Carolina and Texas compensate by basing their performance evaluations primarily on student performance. They set as targets a given proportion of students at or above grade level, say 50 or 70%.

Measuring student performance and holdings schools accountable

It is a simple step to move from developing target performance levels and measuring student performance against these targets, to creating accountability systems in which good performance or improvements over time are rewarded, and sanctions are created for remaining at less-than-satisfactory levels. By the author's informal count, there are accountability systems in place or being implemented in eight states: Alaska, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas.

The Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) serves here as a model for discussion. It is based on a criterion-referenced testing system, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, developed, reviewed and revised by many constituencies across the state over a period of years. As issues have been raised, they have been dealt with; for instance, concerned about differential levels of test-taking in different regions and the possible impact on performance evaluation, the state has made special efforts to create versions of the TAAS for students of limited English proficiency and for students in special education. Schools are given overall ratings. Schools and systems unable to improve risk various penalties, up to takeover by the state.

The reward system is much more visible than the sanction system. Schools showing marked improvement or achieving high performance levels are given "merit badges," such as inclusion on lists of "schools of excellence" or "schools of distinction." (North Carolina)

Some systems (Kentucky) establish complex rules for generating composite scores. These systems may provide more complete and comprehensive ratings of school and system performance, but they pay for this in being hard for the average citizen to comprehend. Such rating systems serve administrative purposes within the educational system, rather than public governance functions.

Changing what we know about schools, and how we talk about it

In any case, the dialogue about school issues has already been altered. The issues raised by performance-based systems are highly central to strongly-declared purposes of education: rates of completion of standards-based performance by high school graduates, for instance. In Texas, 70% of all students must complete the high school exit exam, which is first given in the tenth grade and taken until it is passed. Every high school's performance is measurable by this (admittedly, minimal) standard, and so is the performance of the school system of which it is part. Suddenly, dialogue about "how schools are doing" deals with an issue that all citizens recognize as of vital personal importance (after all, it is easy for those not college-educated to dismiss statements about excellence based on SAT scores or college admission rates). And the Texas system proposes to raise the passing percentage in the coming years.

To borrow a further point of discussion from the Texas setting, the dialogue about who takes the test has shifted the focus of conversation and action onto higher-risk populations: those with limited English proficiency and even students in special education. This brings everyone under the education tent for what may well be the very first time: all students now share the responsibility for the school's performance, and a school that wants to lift itself must deal with all of its students equally. If this principle can "stay the course," the consequences for education will be truly revolutionary.

With a dose of optimism, we can anticipate a more participatory community surrounding our public schools – quite the opposite of the viewpoints expressed with such pessimism just a few years ago. Ironically, opening the schools and school systems up, through technology, to public scrutiny, might increase rates of participation and involvement, or at least increase the rationality of argument.

Open discussion of priorities such as high school graduation with adequate preparation might well open the way to discussion of what "adequate preparation" might actually be. We might actually see alternatives presented for citizen consideration, and not simply isolated from public discussion by alienated constituencies.

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Note: the opinions expressed in the paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of any Federal or state government agency.

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[1] This number is a first-order estimate. Building-level performance reports are available online for 28 states, which in 1996-1997 had a total of 60,464 schools. This represents just over 70% of the 86,058 schools reported for that

academic year. See [Clement et al. 1998] for an analysis of performance reports by state; see [NCES, 1998a], table 1 for a count of schools by state for the 1996-1997 school year.

[2] Actually, comparability between states might be achieved where state standards are established by reference to national standards; however, alignment efforts of this kind largely remain to be undertaken.